

Books of The Times

Further Confusion on James Earl Ray

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

THE STRANGE CASE OF JAMES EARL RAY: The Man Who Murdered Martin Luther King Jr. By Clay Blair Jr. 256 pp. Bantam. Paper, \$95.

CLAY Blair's "The Strange Case of James Earl Ray" (to be available in a day or two, bears all the earmarks of an "instant book." It is the first of a number of biographies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassin. It is being issued, in paperback, only a week after Ray's "trial."

Its literary merits are zero. And it will

be read by an audience painfully confused over its subject matter and hungry for enlightenment. But in fact the book is only partly a "quickie" since it was not written overnight. Clay Blair Jr., who is the former editor of the Saturday Evening Post, began work on it in June, 1968, two months after Dr. King's death and about the time that his assassin was captured. The major part of it, which is a detailed chronological account of James Earl Ray's life from his birth on March 10th, 1928, to his capture in London on June 8th, 1968, was completed by the fall of 1968. It remained for the trial to take place and the last section, describing it, to be written. That promised to be the meat of the book.



Associated Press
Clay Blair Jr.

Blair Gets News Peg

But instead of there being a full-dress trial the deal was made between the prosecution and the defense in which Ray was sentenced to 99 years in prison in exchange for his pleading guilty. Much of the American public, suspecting that Ray had been part of a conspiracy, was left confused and unhappy. And Mr. Blair was handed a news peg.

His last chapter became his first. In it he summarized the many questions that remained unanswered and he declared "one of the most heinous crimes in American history . . . forever, an official mystery." He concluded by promising that in his book "all the facts known at the time of the trial are presented. This is the material which would have been the substance of the trial. The reader can now conduct his own trial. He can be prosecution, defense, judge and jury."

An enticing prospect, only it doesn't work out. If anything, what follows in Mr. Blair's account serves only to aggravate the problems created by Ray's "deal." For the book subtly works both sides of the street by promoting simultaneously the

plausibility of a conspiracy and the possibility that Ray worked completely alone. Instead of replacing a full-dress trial, it creates a greater sense of loss that none occurred.

What lends weight to the suspicion of a conspiracy are, first of all, the many unanswered questions. It has been established that James Earl Ray was in contact with someone after his escape from Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City, Mo., on April 24, 1967. But with whom? Who visited him, telephoned him and wrote him before and after Dr. King's assassination? Where did Ray suddenly acquire more money than he had ever had before? How was he able to assume the aliases of three existing Canadians, to all of whom he actually bore a resemblance?

Mr. Blair offers some plausible explanations: the contacts may simply have been an organized criminal underworld through which Ray made money and acquired practical aliases. This organization need not have had anything to do with a conspiracy to murder Dr. King. Mr. Blair also takes pains to rebut the story Ray told William Bradford Huie that appeared in Look magazine. But he also keeps reminding us that many of these mysteries remain.

The Great Transformation

The biggest puzzle is how Ray could have undergone the extraordinary transformation from a nonideological small-time loser, never involved in crimes of violence and always shy with women, to Eric Starvo Galt, big spender, ladies' man, and the executer of an intricate plot against an ideological figurehead. Again, Mr. Blair offers explanations. He tries to show that there were features of Ray's major crime that echoed those of his minor ones, and that the major difference was one of degree, not of substance. The change in scale, Mr. Blair speculates, can be accounted for by a combination of Ray's persisting desire to "make a big score," his voracious reading of espionage "thrillers" at Jeff City, and envy of the notoriety achieved by Lee Harvey Oswald.

Though purely speculative, and based on the flimsiest sort of inductive psychologizing, the author's theories fall into the realm of plausibility, if only because too little is publicly known of Ray's character to refute them. A full-dress trial might even have served to confirm them, just as Sirhan B. Sirhan's conduct in court has helped to quiet suspicions of his involvement in a conspiracy.

But no such trial will occur and there remain unusual psychological pressures on many people to believe that Dr. King was the victim of a conspiracy. All they have to reassure them are the words of J. Edgar Hoover, Ramsey Clark, and the legal principles in Ray's Memphis "trial." Clay Blair's altogether inconclusive summary of the known record adds practically nothing.